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Around the Americas

1985 was a bad year for Nicaraguan rebels

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — The Sandinistas in 1985 gained on three fronts against U.S.-backed rebels, shoving them from strategic northern coffee hills, overrunning their "southern front," and persuading many Atlantic coast insurgents to quit fighting, according to government officials and diplomats.

But the Sandinistas failed to win the "strategic victory" they had vowed for the year, and with Washington more firmly than ever behind the rebels, known as contras, officials predict that the Nicaraguan fighting will intensify in 1986.

During the year, Sandinista troops evacuated nearly 100,000 peasants from dozens of contra-influenced microregions across the Nicaraguan outback, then — in the first air-mobile operations of the war — called in Soviet helicopters and other new armaments for unrelenting pursuit of the rebels. Meanwhile, the Sandinista infantry mounted larger, more complex hunt-and-kill operations than ever.

"This year has developed very favorably for the Revolution, in its battle with the mercenary arm of U.S. policy," said Commander Joaquin Cuadra, chief of staff of the Sandinista Army, in a recent press conference analyzing the war.

Increasing airpower

The contras surprised everyone Dec. 2 by shooting down a government troop transport helicopter with a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile, calling into question the Sandinistas' increasing airpower advantage.

Otherwise, 1985 was a bad year on the battlefield for the rebels, though they opened up a new war front in Nicaragua's lonely eastern cattlelands and bloodied the Sandinistas occasionally with killing ambushes.

The contras' major gain came in Washington, where Congress for the first time gave them its public stamp of approval by voting \$27 million in "humanitarian aid."

Administration officials have already begun lobbying to boost that support with "lethal defensive aid," a campaign that diplomats and Nicaraguan officials here presume will be accompanied by a rebel offensive in the first months of 1986.

The rebels' setbacks in the field in 1985 deepened doubts among several Western diplomats here that the contras can ever threaten the Sandinista army. That skepticism, coupled with Washington's thickening antagonism toward the Managua government, has led some hitherto skeptical foreign officials to conclude that the chances of an eventual U.S. invasion are mounting.

The rebels increased their numbers dramatically during 1985. Today even the Sandinistas concede that there are 16,000-17,000 contras under arms. Nicaragua's troop strength also grew. Today it fields an astounding 60,000 regulars and 60,000 militiamen and reservists, and tens of thousands of armed sympathizers.

More modest goals

The contras, who once hoped to seize a chunk of Nicaraguan territory and declare a "liberated zone," aspire to more modest goals in 1986. According to a U.S. intelligence analyst, the rebels hope to reopen the southern front they lost this year, continue to harass Sandinista units deep inside Nicaragua, and "take the war to the cities."

"The goal is to create the perception among the Nicaraguan population that the Sandinistas are not invincible and that they have lost the ability to control the country," the analyst said.

As 1985 draws to a close, however, the Sandinistas look very much in control, diplomats here agreed.

The government's gains are most obvious in the northern mountains hugging the Honduran border, strategic terrain dotted with rich coffee farms and etched with the contras' longtime infiltration routes into the Nicaraguan interior.

During last winter's harvest, contra units had already ambushed several trucks jammed with pickers and burned dozens of farms. By the end of the harvest in April, officials reported that contras had killed more than 35 pickers — and had forced the government to leave \$20 million worth of coffee beans to rot on the bushes.

Northern offensive

Starting in January, at the harvest's peak, the Sandinista army fired up a northern offensive that lasted, with few interruptions, until September, officials said. For the first time, the army mounted multiple-unit sweeps, complex encircle-and-destroy operations orchestrating six and seven of its elite, 1,000-man irregular warfare battalions.

During the same period, the government relocated an estimated 100,000 peasants living in areas of strong contra influence to government-controlled cooperatives. The evacuation was aimed at isolating the contras from their collaborators, and opened free-fire zones for artillery and air bombardment.

Sandinista officials now claim the nine-month northern offensive blocked many traditional infiltration routes and largely cleared the coffee slopes of contras.

"This year we plan to harvest every bean on every farm," said Henry Matus, in charge of the coffee harvest for the Agriculture Ministry. He said harvesters so far have not suffered a single casualty.

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Starting in March, Sandinista troops in the south also swept eastward through the steamy swamps bordering Costa Rica, rolling up the rebel camps controlled by Eden Pastora. By late May, there was little left of the "southern front" Pastora had been building since early 1983.

Sandinista artillery strayed south of the border, killing a Costa Rican soldier during the campaign. After a Honduran soldier was killed in similar circumstances in September, Honduran A37 jets reacted by strafing artillery emplacements in Nicaragua and damaging a Soviet-built Mi24 Hind helicopter. They were the worst border incidents of the contra war. "As long as there are contras in Honduras or in Costa Rica, frictions of this type will continue," said Nicaraguan army chief Cuadra.

Hitting cattle ranches

In May, with Nicaraguan troops hunting them down along both borders, the rebels penetrated deep into the country's center to hit cattle ranches and small towns dotting the desolate range land of Chontales and Boaco provinces.

The contra presence there especially annoys the Sandinistas because of their intermittent threat to the highway linking Managua with the river port of Rama, a major off-loading point for arms shipments.

The contras have kept up their attacks for months — in mid-December ambushing several government trucks and burning at least four state farms — forcing the Sandinistas to divert nearly a third of its troops south from the Honduran border, according to a foreign analyst.

But the fierce Sandinista reaction to two contra strikes demonstrated increasing government control. On Aug. 1, when rebels briefly took over La Trinidad, a town straddling the Panamerican Highway north of Managua, the Sandinistas ferried in wave after wave of airborne pursuit troops and strafed a retreating contra column caught in the open with Soviet-built Mi24 Hind attack helicopters.

"They really ripped them apart," a diplomat said. Casualty reports ranged up to 150 contra dead and another 51 captured.

On Nov. 19 rebels attacked the cowboy town of Santo Domingo in Chontales province. Again, the contras took costly losses after helicopters surprised them outside

of town in open ground.

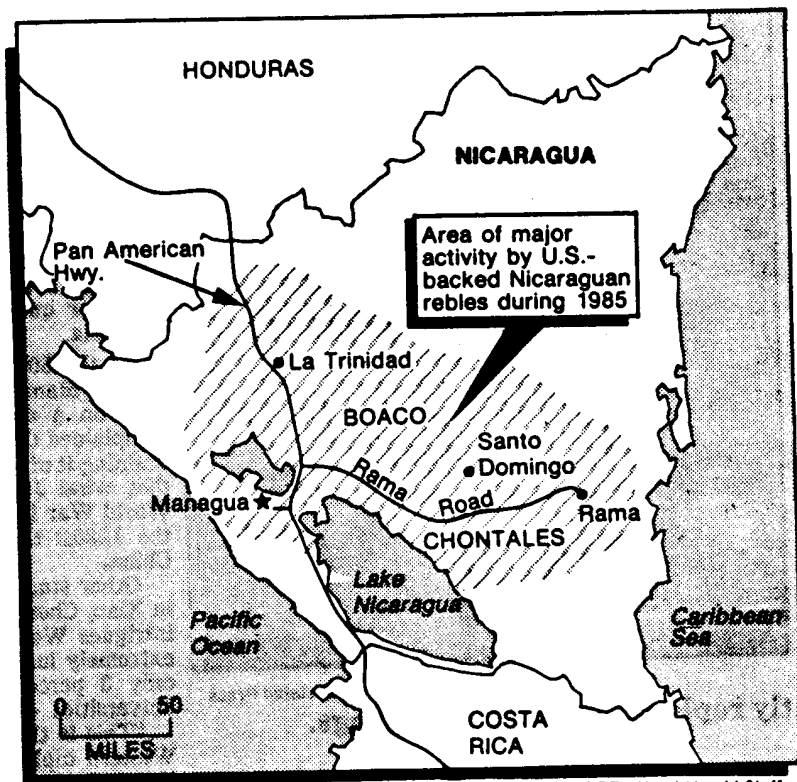
On Dec. 2, as a Sandinista Mi8 helicopter clattered away from Mulukuku in eastern Zelaya province, the rebels for the first time locked on to its hot exhaust vents with a surface-to-air missile. Fourteen soldiers died in the crash, including, U.S. officials claimed, two Cuban pilots.

Washington denied having supplied the Soviet-built SAM-7s, but various administration officials applauded the challenge they represented to the Sandinistas' increasingly devastating counterattacks.

U.S. intelligence analysts believe that the Nicaraguans, too, have their own anti-aircraft missiles, which could threaten Honduras-based transport planes that supply contra columns inside Nicaragua.

At his presidential inauguration in January, Daniel Ortega pledged that the Sandinistas would deal the contras a "strategic defeat" in 1985, and today Sandinista officials express great confidence about the course of the war.

But in November, Defense Minister Humberto Ortega slipped the contras' "strategic defeat" off for another year.



VIVIEN E. RIPPE/Miami Herald Staff